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William "Ike" Eisenhower
Portland State University

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If you commit, that old gown looks just fine

By William "Ike" Eisenhower

While perusing a few old publications as I cleaned the clutter out of my office last month, I came across a magazine (*Electronic Learning*) regarding the use of computers in education, circa 1994.

An article by Bruce Sterling, an American science fiction writer, discussed why the computer at that time was the modern equivalent of the Victorian ball gown: extremely expensive, requiring an entourage of support people, and in 18 months you need to get rid of it – not because it fails to work, but just because people laugh at you. The rest of the article went on to chide teachers in falling for, as rock star Freddie Mercury once referred to Victorian life, the “exquisite clutter.”

Clutter, or more specifically the removal of clutter in processes, work flow and paperwork, is a key element of most continuous improvement processes. So I find it ironic that so many methods we have in current use tend to add more “exquisite clutter” than the real clutter they remove. Unfortunately, the same perceptions Sterling had regarding education’s response to the computer tend to haunt us in the health systems field as well.

However, in our case, it is not the computer proxied for the Victorian ball gown, but the improvement system du jour. These systems constantly replace for no real reason, build up enormous support requirements and figuratively laugh at those who remain committed to a “last season” approach.

In our quest to improve systems, make things lean and streamline swim lanes, we tend to add a lot of clutter in terms of qualifications, certifications, documentation, meetings and on and on. All of these, like the Victorian ball gown, require support staff, are extremely expensive, and more often than not we tend to eschew them 18 or so months later. Again, we move on not

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because the improvement systems don’t work, but because something else has come along that is more in fashion.

I am, as most are, aware that industrial and systems engineering is much more than continuous improvement efforts or business process improvement. Most of my colleagues that I talk with are cognizant of the fact that every new improvement fad that comes into fashion is just a rehash of the same old Shewhart cycle of PDSA (plan, do, study, act). The “new” improvements are just all dressed up in foreign words, a hemline adjustment of the diagrams used, or frilly synonyms. Indeed, they are new gowns for the same old purpose.

So is there really any harm?

The system continues to be improved, more books are placed on a shelf, new certifications are added to the resumé,

more software, more diagrams, more meetings – in other words, a bunch more clutter that often is meaningless and unnecessary. This clutter clouds the ability for nonengineers to understand that improvement is not that complicated. Improvement does not require a new entourage of consultants, coordinators and workshops – what it really needs is commitment.

This is not a commitment to chase every new shiny bauble or every new trend from Paris. This is a long-term commitment to stay the course, not change the gown of improvement just because this year’s offering has Figgelward awards for employee engagement, AW4X diagrams or promises to “proactively visualize error-free intellectual capital through energetically predominate cross-functional synergies.”

What it desperately needs is that firm commitment to improve the system by ridding the system of clutter and not allowing next years’ Victorian gown tailors into court. So stop being an improvement method fashion victim. ♦

William “Ike” Eisenhower is an engineering professor at Portland State University and national director of the Veterans Engineering Resource Centers for the Veterans Health Administration. His interests are integrating engineering and healthcare professionals to increase the value of health systems and advancing engineering science to address healthcare delivery challenges. He can be reached at wde@pdx.edu.

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